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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

January 2013

## COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, January 17, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. Guest speaker for the program will be Ron Skellie, who will discuss his book, *Lest We Forget—The Immortal Seventh Mississippi*. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-0090. Please call **by noon on Wednesday, January 16**, to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people, and to apprise us of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$10.00.



Honey Island Swamp, located between the East Pearl and West Pearl Rivers in southeastern Louisiana

## MEMBERSHIP FEES

The 2013 Membership Drive is on! It's time for current members to renew their membership in the Historical Society and to encourage family and friends to join us too. The price of membership is twenty-five (\$25) per year. The date on your address label is your date of membership expiration. If your label says 12/12 or before, it's time to renew! Please mail your renewal checks to Hancock County Historical Society, P. O. Box 3356, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521.

## Mystery of the Honey Island Swamp-Rat Killings

By  
Eddie Coleman

Mystery, intrigue, and legend have enshrouded one area of the lowest part of the Pearl River basin for centuries—Honey Island Swamp. Located between the East and West Pearl Rivers, it has engendered tales of pirates, ne'er-do-wells, robbers, murderers, and

other unsavory characters. While respectable, honest people have lived there through the years, it has also been a hideout for such local outlaws as James Copeland and his gang as well as numerous moonshiners and others. Technically within the boundaries of Louisiana, its location has enticed outlaws running from Mississippi authorities and criminals evading Louisiana lawmen.

One murder in particular in the Honey Island Swamp drew attention from federal as well as state and local authorities. On December 23, 1926, two U. S. Department of Agri-

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## LOBRANO HOUSE HOURS

MONDAY — FRIDAY  
 10:00AM — 3:00PM  
 Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

## MISSION STATEMENT

"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

culture entomologists ventured into the swamp for a hunting trip. They had been warned of the types of questionable characters who were inhabitants of the area, but they scoffed at the admonitions.

The men, William Mingee and John McLemore, crossed the Pearl River bridge south of Picayune and parked their truck a distance from the roadway on the Louisiana side of the river. Finding an abandoned shack, they began unloading their truck, making several treks between it and their discovered shelter. Suddenly, a shot rang out, dropping McLemore to the soggy ground with a fatal head wound.

Mingee had been assembling his gun at the truck and upon hearing the shotgun blast raced toward his companion. Another shot rang out sending buckshot into the middle of Mingee's chest and propelling his lifeless body to the dank earth. A few minutes later a raggedly dressed, "swarthy-hued" denizen of the swamp stole the truck and raced away as if Satan himself were in pursuit.

Overdue from their hunting trip, the bodies of the two men were found two days later by a search party led by F. A. Wright, the head of the Federal Agricultural Bureau at Bay St. Louis who was also the supervisor of the murdered men. The scene discovered by the searchers was horrific, the buckshot having wrought a ghastly impression on the two men. In addition Mingee's heavy coat had been stolen as well as the high topped boots he was wearing as he left Picayune. Missing from McLemore were an automatic pistol and gold watch.

In addition to the bodies, other evidence included tire tracks which led to the Pearl River bridge and then turned eastward, pointing out the murderer had crossed into Hancock County. Looking further,

Wright discovered and isolated the footprints of the culprit which led to a large oak tree behind which he found two spent .12-gauge shotgun shells.

When word of the murders reached Picayune, the townspeople were up in arms and were soon joined by local farmers with whom Mingee and McLemore had worked to rid local crops of the sweet potato weevil. Immediately the group suspected a Honey Island inhabitant by the name of Dock Jackson.

"Shooting a man from behind a tree is just like Dock," yelled one excited citizen. "Let's find him and lynch him!"

Dock Jackson was an inhabitant of Honey Island Swamp with a notorious reputation. People of all races gave him a wide berth because his reputation as a heartless scoundrel was well-known. Stories of his seeking revenge on those who crossed him as well as their families were legendary, and locals didn't want to do anything to bring Jackson's wrath upon themselves or their families. Stories of his slaughtering livestock, burning homes, torturing family members, and other atrocities were rampant.

Three reports of Jackson's vengeance bear repeating. Once after his visiting a widow named Mrs. Emmaline Pierson, her body was found in her home. Jackson's explanation was that a pistol had fallen from a table sending a .44 caliber bullet through her heart.

Another is that a man named Henry Bennett had been killed mysteriously by a shotgun blast as he drove along a lonely Pearl River road. Supposedly Dock Jackson had been seen in the area of the mysterious death a few minutes earlier.

A third report concerns a black man with whom Jackson had had "words" who was found shortly

hereafter with a lethal shotgun wound to the head.

For these and other atrocities, Jackson was wanted by the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff. However, once Jackson made it to Honey Island Swamp, he faded into the surroundings as did the alligators, snakes, and his fellow denizens of the marsh.

Because the murderer fled into Hancock County, its sheriff, Joe Bontemps, formed a posse to search the swamp for Jackson and clues. His hunt ranged from the northern reaches of the swamp southward to Lake Borgne and the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, he had little success. In conjunction with Bontemps' search, the FBI sent Agents E. L. Osborn and E. P. Amis to aid local authorities because McLemore and Mingee were federal employees.

With this additional help the search became more widespread in an attempt to find the truck in the hope that the culprit's fingerprints might be located. Word came that the truck had been found along the roadside near Hattiesburg, MS about seventy miles or so north of Picayune by Officer J. E. Wassengale.

The two federal agents, Osborn and Amis, went to Hattiesburg to retrieve the pick up, dust it for fingerprints, and question Officer Wassengale, who had been stopped by the driver of the truck earlier to ask for directions. Later the officer found the vehicle abandoned along the road. When questioned by the federal agents, he described the driver as "[having] long black hair and [wearing] a mackinaw and knee-high boots." In addition to this description the agents also learned that a pistol had been found hidden in a burlap bag in the bed of the pickup. It proved to be the one stolen from McLemore.

Driving the truck southward from Hattiesburg to Picayune, Osborn and Amis questioned people along the roadway with the goal of finding someone who had seen the long-haired driver. They were not successful until they reached McNeil, a small community north of Picayune. Here they questioned the proprietor of a gas station who remembered seeing such a man driving a truck. His description matched that of Dock Jackson. When news of this discovery reached Picayune, citizens talked of having a "necktie party" with Jackson as the main attraction.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Bontemps had continued his investigation and learned from E. R. Roberts, proprietor of the Southern Hotel in Picayune, that he had found several .12-gauge shotgun shells left by a guest in one of his rooms. Mr. Roberts turned this evidence over to the sheriff and the federal agents.

Learning that a man named Jesse Favre had signed the register, Sheriff Bontemps ordered Deputy Albert Smith to organize a posse to search Honey Island Swamp. The search proved fruitful. Local residents were quite helpful in giving authorities directions to Favre's cabin, nestled in the deep recesses of the swamp. Caught unawares, Favre was quickly handcuffed, and a search of the cabin uncovered a gold Elgin watch, a gold fob, and a fountain pen hidden in a pot on the stove. The watch had the name "William M. Mingee" engraved on the back, and the fob and pen were also identified as having belonged to Mingee.

Deputy Smith snarled, "Well, Favre, looks like we've got you dead to rights. But why did you have to kill them?"

Growling like a caged animal, Favre snapped, "I didn't kill 'em—see! Dock Jackson gave

me this stuff." Upon further questioning, the authorities learned that Jackson had given Favre the stolen goods to hide the truck as he subsequently did by driving and abandoning it in the Hattiesburg area.

The question arises, "Did the description of the driver with 'long black hair' fit both Jackson and Favre?" Apparently it fit closely enough to rouse the citizens of Picayune to want to lynch either or both men.

Knowing the attitude of the citizenry, Deputy Smith wanted to get his prisoner in lock up as soon as possible, so he and the other members of the posse loaded him into a waiting police car. Before they could return to the Hancock County jail, Smith received a message from the sheriff that a mob of about one hundred Picayune citizens were on their way to lynch Favre.

Fortunately a New Orleans bound train sounded its whistle, and the quick thinking Smith flagged it down. He boarded with Favre manacled to his wrist, and within an hour Favre was safely ensconced behind bars at New Orleans Police Headquarters.

Thus, Favre was indicted and brought to trial in February 1927. Found guilty of the murder of McLemore, he was given a life sentence. He was not tried for the murder of Mingee.

Nonetheless the saga does not end here. After his conviction Favre admitted that he had committed the murders in conjunction with Jackson. Hence Jackson was arrested at Nicholson and taken to the Pearl River County jail in Poplarville. When word reached Picayune of Jackson's capture and confinement, a mob of about one hundred men, infuriated at Favre's not being lynched, stormed the jail. Using acetylene torches to burn through the bars, they took Jackson prisoner.

A caravan of about twenty-five cars drove southward toward Honey Island Swamp and Pearl River with the taunting intent to lynch Jackson at the bridge where the murders had taken place.

However, the mob was to be disappointed. Along the way the riotous caravan was stopped at the Bogue Chitto Creek bridge by a local farmer who informed them that authorities were in close pursuit. Not to be dissuaded from their mission, one of the mobsters yelled, "Let's do it here. Right from the Bogue Chitto Creek Bridge."

Losing all dignity, Jackson had to be dragged and thrust upon the banister of the bridge. With the rope secured around his neck and taunts of "Jump!" ringing in his ears, the hysterical prisoner was pushed from the railing.

Too late Sheriff Bontemps and his deputies arrived upon the scene to find only the body of Jackson hanging from an improvised gallows with none of the hangmen in sight. Such was the inglorious end of the infamous Dock Jackson of Honey Island Swamp. In effect, "the devil [got] his due."

#### SOURCE:

Mefford, Arthur. "Mystery of the Honey Island Swamp-Rat Killings." *Sunday Mirror*, 24 Jan. 1943.

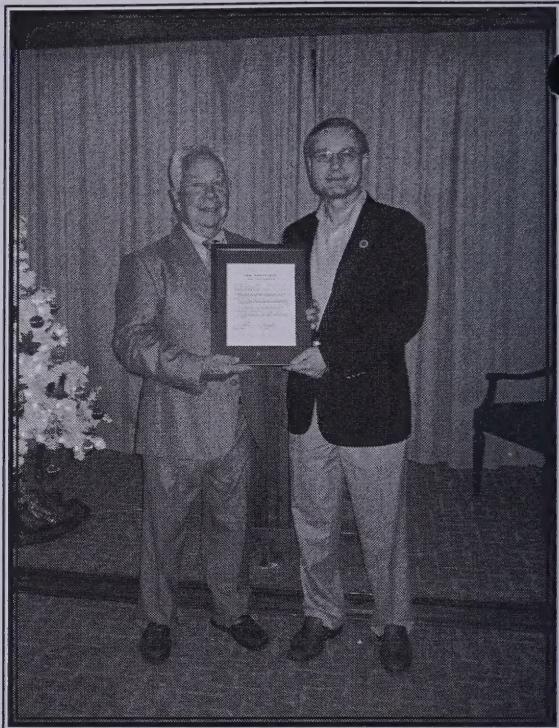
*[Editor's note: This article was sent to me by the grandson of Joseph V. Bontemps, sheriff of Hancock County at the time of these murders.]*

### Historical Society Receives Resolution of Commendation

At the annual Christmas Tea held on December 6, 2012, the Hancock County Historical Society was awarded a Resolution of Commenda-

tion by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Special guest Ken P'Pool, Director of the Historic Preservation Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History made the presentation.

Pictured in the photo at the right are Charles Gray, Executive Director of the Hancock County Historical Society, on the left accepting the award from Ken P'Pool on the right.



#### Mississippi Department of Archives and History

#### RESOLUTION OF COMMENDATION

WHEREAS, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, damaging or destroying thousands of historic properties; and

WHEREAS, local governments and institutions on the Gulf Coast responded heroically to save the region's historic resources; and

WHEREAS, the Hancock County Historical Society has worked tirelessly for many years to document and preserve the history of Bay St. Louis and Hancock County; and

WHEREAS, the Hancock County Historical Society carefully restored the Kate Lobrano House following severe damage by Hurricane Katrina and made the house available to MDAH staff and volunteers who were documenting the damage to historic structures during the weeks following Katrina; and

WHEREAS, the Hancock County Historical Society publishes an outstanding monthly newsletter and other first-rate books, articles, and genealogical resources;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, assembled on October 28, 2011, in Biloxi, Mississippi, that the Hancock County Historical Society be commended and thanked for its extraordinary contribution to the documentation and preservation of the Gulf Coast's cultural heritage.

*H. T. Holmes*

H. T. Holmes  
Secretary-Treasurer

*J. Kane Dito*

J. Kane Dito  
President

## The Installation of the 2013 Board of Directors

The annual Christmas Tea with the installation of the 2013 Board of Directors was held on Thursday afternoon, December 6, from 3:00—5:00 P. M. at the Kate Lobrano House, the home of the Hancock County Historical Society at 108 Cue Street, Bay Saint Louis.

After a brief recap of ongoing projects at the society for the past year, Executive Director Charles Gray introduced the 2013 board members and presented each with a certificate of office. Serving on the board are Louis Fuchs,

president; Christina Richardson, first vice president; Sally Lindsley, second vice president; Pat Fuchs, treasurer; Betty Krieger, secretary; Jackie Allain, publicity chairperson; Ellis Cuevas, historian; and Jerry Zimmerman, member at large.

Charles then introduced Bay Saint Louis Mayor Les Fillingame, who praised the society for its efforts to preserve the history and culture of Hancock County. In addition, Mayor Fillingame applauded the efforts of the society to make this information readily accessible to the public at the Lobrano House and on the society website.

After the mayor's brief remarks, Charles introduced Ken P'Pool, Director of the Historic Preservation Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Ken presented the society with a Resolution of Commendation from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Before making the formal presentation of the Resolution, he praised the organization for its work prior to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, but especially for its work since that time. He recognized the vital role the Historical Society played in aiding state and national archivists in their restoration work after the storm.

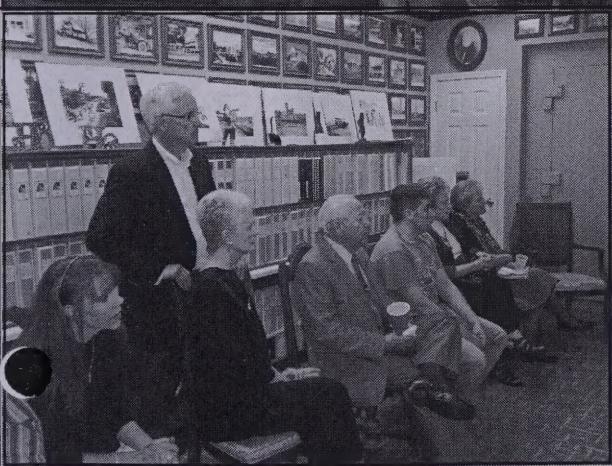


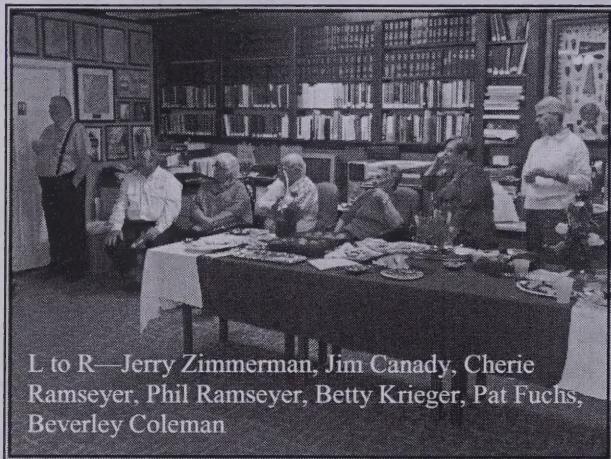
Pictured at left—The 2013 Board of Directors: Back row (L to R)—Charles Gray, Louis Fuchs, Jerry Zimmerman; Front row (L to R)—Ellis Cuevas, Tina Richardson, Betty Krieger, Pat Fuchs, Jackie Allain (Not pictured is Sally Lindsley, who was unable to attend.)

Pictured below— (on left) Mayor Les Fillingame (on right) Charles Gray



Pictured at left (L to R): Jackie Allain, Scott Bagley (standing), Sandra Bagley, Russell Guerin, Tim Stinson, Marcella Archibeque, Ann Farr





L to R—Jerry Zimmerman, Jim Canady, Cherie Ramseyer, Phil Ramseyer, Betty Krieger, Pat Fuchs, Beverley Coleman



Historical Society members visiting at the Christmas tea

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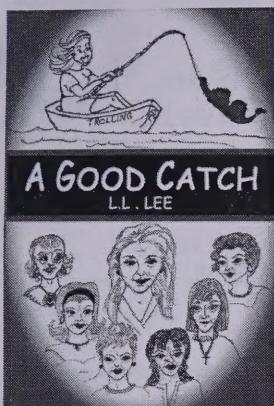
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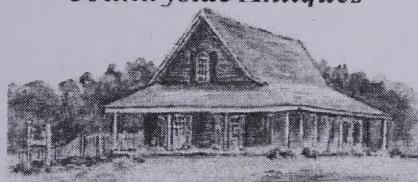


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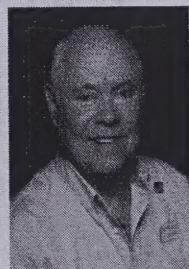
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